

THE SUPERIORITY OF RELIGIOUS DUTIES
TO WORLDLY CONSIDERATIONS.

13.

A S E R M O N

P R E A C H E D

IN THE UNITARIAN CHAPEL,

IN ESSEX-STREET, LONDON;

SUNDAY, APRIL XX, MDCCC.

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1800.



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LUKE, XVIII. 29, 30.

JESUS SAID UNTO THEM, VERILY, I SAY UNTO YOU, THERE IS NO MAN THAT HATH LEFT HOUSE, OR PARENTS, OR BRETHREN, OR WIFE, OR CHILDREN FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD'S SAKE, WHO SHALL NOT RECEIVE MANIFOLD MORE IN THIS PRESENT TIME, AND IN THE WORLD TO COME LIFE EVERLASTING.

When Jesus held a conversation with a certain ruler of the Jews, who insisted much on his literal observance of the commandments, but was unwilling to contribute liberally out of his own great riches to the relief and assistance of the necessitous poor, our lord very seasonably observed that it was 'easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom

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‘ of God.’ By this observation, he apparently meant, that they who trust in riches are very much disposed to sacrifice all the real endearments and amiable charities of life to the possession of their unprofitable treasure ; and by such misapplication and abuse of the blessings committed to their trust, as stewards of the abundant gifts of God, to forfeit his approbation and favor. So true it is that ‘ the love of money is the root of ‘ all evil.*

The apostle Peter, who, on other occasions as well as this, shewed a forward and impatient temper, instantly boasted that himself and his companions had forsaken all to follow Christ. In reply, our lord introduced the declaration and doctrine of our text, ‘ Verily, I say unto you, there is no man that ‘ hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or ‘ wife, or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold ‘ more in this present time, and, in the world ‘ to come, everlasting life.’

The recompence held forth in the gospel

* 1 Tim. vi. 10.

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of Christ to the virtuous and the good in this world, is the glorious consciousness of a well spent life, and the reasonable hope of favor and acceptance with God at the day of final retribution. But, so little does the gospel engage to advance our worldly interests, as such, that it even requires us to sacrifice all our goods and possessions, and the still dearer attachments of parent, brother, wife, or child in the support and maintenance of our religion, our virtue and our integrity. When the question is put to us in express terms,—whether we will serve God or Mammon? there is something so decisive in the phraseology that we are willing to persuade ourselves that we should not hesitate, upon any occasion, to devote ourselves to the service of God, in the full sense and import of those words. At all events, it is certain, we cannot serve both. It is very generally agreed that no man can serve two masters, because of their different and clashing interests; but when they are so directly opposed to each other as are God and Belial, it is utterly impossible to make such contrary principles to coalesce, as must destroy each other; a devotedness to one

must occasion the reprobation of the other ; and we might as well imagine any thing to exist and not to exist at the same time, as to suppose that we could compound with God by sharing in the pleasures of sin, which are but for a moment, and, at the same time, enjoy the exalted satisfaction and comfort of a truly religious and virtuous mind.

No words can more strongly express the disparity between the kingdom of God and the things of this world, or more forcibly recommend the preference which is decidedly due to the former, when these objects interfere with each other, than the words of Christ cited in our text. Great and numerous as are the blessings which are bestowed upon us in this life, by the no less bountiful, than wise, disposer of all things, they are infinitely short of that recompence which awaits the diligent, faithful, and persevering disciple of Christ in the world to come ; a world which ‘ eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man too fully to comprehend.’ *

* 1 Cor. ii. 9.

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Since, therefore, so much is promised in this present time, and in the future world, to those who shall so ardently seek the kingdom of God, as to risk the loss of, and, if occasion shall require, to part with, all the world holds dear for the sake of heaven, and heaven's happiness; let us proceed to state the means by which we can attain this desirable resignation to the good pleasure of God, according as the various events of human life shall require.

Religion and virtue are, indeed, general terms, but they are neither so vague, nor so changeable as to excuse any considerable mistake in the practice of what our situation may require of us with reference to God or man. Rigid austerities are not to be found among the reprehensible parts of the conduct of christians in our day or country; neither is the cloistered uselessness of monastic life to be classed among our religious delusions. Christians are, indeed, sometimes obliged to adopt an austere and mortifying discipline, but the austerity and mortification arise from the necessary contention with our acquired habits of sin

and folly, with the temptations of the world, and with the indulgences we have previously allowed ourselves. With respect to those who remain all the day idle, and pass their time in disgraceful listlessness, little can be said. They proclaim their indolent omissions before the world, where their most active powers are wanted, but as their example may, by such exposure, be supposed in a certain degree to influence their brethren, they are more injurious members of the community even than sequestered monks.

Among the reprehensible austerities not yet relinquished by christians, there is one, which they continue to practise, not indeed upon themselves, but upon others. A spirit of intolerance still lives, and the pretence of doing God service, by a breach of the law of universal benevolence, is not without example even at this advanced period of the christian æra. We have not indeed seen the fires of the sixteenth century actually re-kindled; but although the zealots of our day do not formally seek the life of the devoted victim, they attack, in various ways, the peace, the comfort and the usefulness of his life,

life, and make their advances in very questionable and clandestine shapes, equally disgraceful to religion, learning and good faith.

In order, therefore, to improve our title to, and hope of, the kingdom of God, let us give the right hand of fellowship to every fellow-creature upon the earth; let us faithfully exercise our own religious liberty, and inviolably regard the religious liberty of all the rest of mankind. Being free ourselves, let us not reproach upon the liberty of others, but equally cultivate among ourselves and our bretheren of every religious persuasion, that spirit and temper of mind, which so eminently distinguished the character of Jesus Christ our master.

Wherever this leading feature and character of the christian religion, christian love, is well founded in principle and in sober conviction, it will shew itself in every action of our lives; it will be a good tree yielding good fruit, more and more abundantly as it advanceth to maturity. The principle of universal benevolence will lead us directly to the practice of justice, charity, meekness, patience

and every other virtue ; it will equally lead us to repent of all our past offences, and, in future to avoid the very appearance of evil,

But it is not only in the days of open and avowed persecution, when men are exposed to the severest trials and sufferings, that they are called to abandon the dearest attachments in this world. It will frequently occur that the honest and conscientious discharge of our duty in various instances in common life will oblige us to bear our testimony to the gospel, or to prove our obedience to its precepts, by the sacrifice of what nature bids us to hold very dear, and what religion directs us to improve and enjoy on all other occasions. And our decision, when these alternatives of the performance or neglect of duty are presented to us, will be most correctly formed by asking ourselves this simple question,—shall we obey God or man? The choice, in this plain statement, will admit of no hesitation in the eye of reason or religion : and nothing can induce the least doubt in forming our judgement, but the false estimate we may make between the unrestrained enjoyment of the things of this world, (which are otherwise and in them*

themselves confessedly innocent, commendable and highly to be valued;) and the still greater object of our regard, the approbation and favour of God. The very struggle and contest between these claimants upon our heart and affections, if any struggle shall take place, will constitute the very discipline by which we are tried and perfected; and upon our decision and conduct, in either case, will depend our future happiness.

It can be no impeachment of the just value of all worldly blessings to consider them in the view with which they were apparently given to us by the great bestower of every good. They were intended not only to make us happy here in the reasonable enjoyment of them, but to contribute to our happiness hereafter, by variously calling us to the use or relinquishment of them respectively, which particular occasions might require. If we consider the personal relationships of parent, brother, wife or child; they form in themselves and in their consequences, the chief ingredients of human happiness, but they may be misused by our neglecting the relative duties of each character: these interesting connections are also liable to
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grievous interruptions from the malignant and intermeddling spirit of the calumniator, the tale-bearer and whisperer, or from the un governable temper of some of the parties themselves: they are also liable to be destroyed by the cold hand of death, or by, what is worse than death, a wicked and impenitent heart. But, supposing the measure of human happiness to be filled in these several relationships, our most extended enjoyments of this world's bliss cannot survive many years; and every breach or neglect of duty will make considerable drawbacks upon our peace and comfort. To put, therefore, the affectionate regard we may personally entertain for any of these connections, or for our mere worldly interest, in competition with the positive obligation we owe to God and to ourselves in the high and important duties of religion and virtue, is to contend for things that may be pleasant and desireable in preference of others which are indispensable; it is to contend for needless superfluities, if I may so speak, before the necessities of life; it is to prefer man to God, time to eternity, secondary duties to those which are primary. To say the truth, the possessions of life are then
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most profitable to us, when they serve to try and prove our integrity ; and the dearest ties in nature are then most to be prized when they are made subservient to our mutual moral improvement: and are then most delightful when nothing but a strong sense of the duty we owe to God and his truth, and to the interest of religion and virtue among mankind, can dissolve them.

Suppose for instance, any one of us were to sacrifice our integrity, and consequently our peace of mind, in the fond hope of securing any merely worldly possession or enjoyment, how often may it happen, or more properly let me say, how often has it happened, that the sacrifice is no sooner made, and our departure from the straight road of moral rectitude of conduct confirmed, than the riches at which we grasped have made themselves wings and flown away, the honors which we thought our own were blasted by public derision and contempt, and the power by which we intended to secure ourselves, has been turned to our destruction or discomfiture?

All these riches, honours and power, highly as they are commonly regarded by mankind, are, therefore, among the unsubstantial phantoms which are eagerly sought after by them. But the consideration of the slippery tenure by which men hold these imagined enchantments, will call to our remembrance the parable in the gospel, in which God is represented to have said to the rich and worldly minded man, ‘ Thou fool, this very night thy life shall be required of thee ; then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided ? ’ *

What greater sacrifice, therefore, does the religion of the gospel require of us than real prudence and discretion would direct us to make ? The promise made to those who endeavour to attain the kingdom of God by a truly religious and virtuous life, is the conscious approbation of their own hearts ; and that consequent peace and serenity of mind which result from it. Like that wisdom, of which Solomon speaketh, ‘ It is better than rubies ; and all the things

* Luke xii. 20.

‘ that may be desired, are not to be compared to it.’* And equally true and incontrovertible is his observation, that, ‘ When wisdom entereth into our hearts and knowledge is pleasant unto our soul; discretion will preserve us, understanding will keep us.’ †.

It may, therefore, be again asked, In what respect does the solemn promise of Jesus, that ‘ We shall receive manifold more in this present time; and, in the world to come, everlasting life’—require more self-denial, of us, than the wisdom Solomon recommends; or, indeed, our own reason approves? If the experience of ages confirms the great insufficiency and insecurity of all worldly possessions to our real and efficient happiness,—if our reason shall present them to our sober reflection in the same point of view; where, let me ask, is the hardship of the duty required of us in the gospel, to make all sublunary objects and connections (however valuable and endearing in themselves) subservient to our obedience to the

* Prov. viii. 11.

† Prov. ii. 10, 11.

will of God? Where is the severity in requiring us to desire them no further than they can be enjoyed with innocence; to retain them no longer than while they neither remove, nor corrupt, our integrity; and to resign them when the principles of our holy religion, and the maintenance of our virtue, shall call upon us so to do.

When this view of our present subject shall have sufficiently impressed our minds, all the difficulties and impediments which obtrude themselves to the hindrance of our resignation of the attachments to our nearest kindred and dearest friends, and of the possessions of this world, for the attainment of a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, will cease improperly to influence either our judgment or our behaviour. It will then be our pleasure to do the will of our heavenly father, whose design it is finally to give to all his rational creatures immortal happiness. We shall then consider this world as our inn and not our home; our passage to another country, and not our abiding place; as our state of probation and not our final reward. This just view of our
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situation here, we shall find to be founded in truth: the proper consideration and the seasonable application of it will afford us consolation under every apparently adverse scene in human life, and give us a contented and even chearful mind under every discipline in the course of our christian warfare. And let us remember, that it will be our greatest victory, not so much to have succeeded in obtaining the riches and honors of the world, as to have overcome the temptations of it; neither to have despised, nor to have been immoderately attached to the things of this world; but to have considered human life, and the innumerable blessings with which it is so bountifully strewed, as the gracious boon of a wise, a good and a kind God, designed to be enjoyed, and by that very enjoyment to prepare and qualify us for an ever-improving and never-ending happiness in a future state.

Consider, therefore, my brethren, the kingdom of God as our greatest treasure, for we know that where our greatest treasure is, there will our heart be also. And let us impress upon our memory the words of Jesus,
 which

which are so agreeable to the language of nature, and likewise so consonant with our rational convictions and our greatest interest:

‘ There is no man that hath left house, or
‘ parents, or brethren, or wife, or children
‘ for the kingdom of God’s sake, who will
‘ not receive manifold more in this present
‘ time, and in the world to come, everlasting
‘ life.’

THE END

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